

Preface

WHAT IS THE BIRMINGHAM COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

The Birmingham Comprehensive Plan is a 20-year policy and strategic guide for future decision making about our city's growth, quality of life, economic prosperity, and environment. The Plan is guided by an overall vision for the future created through an unprecedented program of community engagement. This vision embodies the unique personality, culture, and heritage of our city. The Plan provides community-based goals, strategies to achieve the goals, and implementation actions for a broad array of issues that affect our citizens' daily lives and opportunities in the future: from economic development, transportation and neighborhood revitalization to land use, public facilities, and natural systems and parks. Through an implementation process described in Chapter 15, specific actions are assigned to agencies responsible for implementation, along with potential partners from outside government. Committed citizens working together with the appropriate government agencies, the private sector and non-profit organizations can help to fully realize the vision and initiatives set forth in the plan. While local government through the Mayor and City Council must provide funding for many programs and capital improvements such as parks, sidewalks, and streets, the strategic framework in this community-based plan can also attract funding through competitive grants, philanthropy, and private investment.

The City of Birmingham's Comprehensive Plan is the product of many months of work by city staff, Planning Commission members, Steering Committee members, and citizens of the City of Birmingham. It was created to accomplish the following:

- To identify and examine the city's assets and the challenges it faces, and to identify appropriate strategies and opportunities that take advantage of the city's existing and potential strengths.
- To define a vision of Birmingham's future that will inspire, guide and direct growth in the city while being responsive to citizen needs and desires.
- To develop a plan based on realistic and achievable goals, building on the city's considerable assets and designed to restore and enhance basic services, attract and retain quality businesses and jobs, rebuild neighborhoods, reinvest in families and schools, and continue the city's historic role as a leader in the region and the state.

The *Birmingham Comprehensive Plan* is the city's guide to future land use, transportation, and economic development decisions, and a unifying document that brings together many existing plans that guide and enhance growth in Birmingham's communities. The *Birmingham Comprehensive Plan* is comprehensive because:

- The Plan analyzes a broad spectrum of existing conditions to provide a clear picture of the current state of the city including population and land use trends, housing, neighborhoods, economic development, transportation, and public facilities and services.
- The Plan covers a wide array of subject areas related to the future growth and development of the city, from land use, transportation, economic development, workforce development, and downtown and neighborhood development to the natural environment, parks and open space, and public facilities.
- Fundamentally, the *Birmingham Comprehensive Plan* is about growth, redevelopment and revitalization. Birmingham is a city built upon a foundation of world-class health care, strong financial institutions, a diversified and entrepreneurial business community, and a lively culture of higher education, the arts, and entertainment. This Plan is supported by an involved citizenry, an active business community, a committed institutional, educational, and cultural sector, and city government. As the city redevelops, its future is dependent on the vitality of and cooperation among these groups.

STATE REQUIREMENTS FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Alabama law requires that:

The [comprehensive] plan shall be made with the general purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted and harmonious development of the municipality and its environs which will, in accordance with present and future needs, best promote health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare as well as efficiency and economy in the process of development, including, among other things, adequate provision for traffic, the promotion of safety from fire and other dangers, adequate provision for light and air, the promotion of the healthful and convenient distribution of population, the promotion of good civic design and arrangement, wise and efficient expenditure of public funds and the adequate provision of public utilities and other public requirements. — Alabama Code 5 11-52-9

The language of the statute is general in nature and allows local governments a broad degree of freedom in writing their comprehensive plans, while ensuring that the fundamentals of a good comprehensive plan are all present. The plan

must help guide future development, protect and promote the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of Birmingham, promote good civic design, and coordinate the efficient and adequate provision of public services.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND A ZONING ORDINANCE?

A **comprehensive plan** is a vision of what a community wants to become, and a framework for accomplishing that vision. A comprehensive plan consists of various elements that are separate but related to each other, such as transportation, community and neighborhood revitalization, the natural environment, and how land is used now and in the future. The elements share a set of common assumptions, such as the plan's geographic area and the time horizon for recommendations and implementation. The elements are intended to work together and reinforce each other so that the plan sets forth a comprehensive and holistic strategy for where and how the city should develop and redevelop in order to provide existing and new citizens with a high quality of life, prosperity, and opportunities for success.

In the State of Alabama, a comprehensive plan is *advisory* in nature and does not have the force of law. A comprehensive plan usually includes a *Future Land Use Plan* that is intended to help achieve the city's long-range vision of growth. Birmingham's Future Land Use Plan provides guidance and recommendations on the parcel level for the general type and density of new development within the existing city limits, which may be the same or may differ from current land uses. A Future Land Use Plan may be used by planning staff and decision-making bodies such as the Planning Commission and City Council as a reference for evaluating land use decisions that come before them.

A comprehensive plan also contains narrative recommendations in the form of goals, policies, and strategies. The recommendations are intended to be implemented over the full time frame of the plan, with some being implemented in the beginning, and others later; some may not be adopted at all, depending on changing conditions or opportunities over time. These recommendations come in several forms. Some recommendations may be *capital projects*, such as a new park or a rehabilitated community building. Other recommendations are *programmatic*, meaning they recommend items that are not necessarily regulatory, such as providing information to the public or establishing new processes for how work is done in city government. Still other recommendations are *regulatory*, requiring changes in regulations or ordinances by standard procedures that require public hearings and City Council actions. For example, the Community Framework Plans recommended in the Birmingham Comprehensive Plan will include detailed analysis of Birmingham's communities and may result in new zoning and development regulations. The

important distinction is that, while the recommendations may advocate for change to legal requirements and documents such as the zoning ordinance, the recommendations are not enforceable unless legal changes are actually made to the regulations in question. Such changes require the review of the Planning Commission and the approval of City Council, with separate public hearings for each.

A **zoning ordinance** is a regulatory tool used to implement plans and policies. It is a legal, enforceable part of City Code that is used to regulate the use of land within the city limits and the type, scale, and intensity of use on that land. Zoning ordinances are legally binding, and as part of City Code they have the force of law. Requirements of a zoning ordinance *must* be met, unless a waiver or variance is granted, and planning staff and decision-making bodies such as the Planning Commission and City Council must apply it to cases that come before them. A zoning ordinance may be amended from time to time, but it is not intended to have a limited timeframe. A zoning ordinance is one tool for implementing a comprehensive plan.

WHAT IS THE LEGAL STATUS OF THE MAPS IN THE BIRMINGHAM COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

The *Birmingham Comprehensive Plan* contains many descriptive and analytical maps based on digital map layers. The digital map layers and map data were provided by the City of Birmingham and a few other entities (individual maps provide source information), and the maps were created either by the consultant team or the City of Birmingham. Because the Comprehensive Plan is an advisory document, the maps in the Plan are not legally authoritative sources on the location of natural or manmade features. They are intended for general reference, informational planning or guidance. The City and the consultant team make no warranty, express or implied, as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, or currentness of the maps.

How to Use This Plan

The new Birmingham Comprehensive Plan is neither a *prediction* nor a *projection* of the future. It is a *plan*. Built on the ambitious vision of the people of the City of Birmingham, it recognizes the existence of obstacles and unresolved practical questions. It provides strategies for overcoming the obstacles and answering the questions. But no plan is self-implementing. A new era of partnerships—government, residents, businesses, institutions, and nonprofits all working together—can bring this ambitious vision to reality.

WHAT'S IN THE PLAN? HOW SHOULD I READ IT?

The Birmingham Comprehensive Plan includes an Executive Summary and covers a broad range of topics in 15 chapters about current trends, the planning process, all aspects of community life that affect the way our city can develop in the future, and implementation actions. The chapters are organized into six Parts, each of which starts with a summary of the contents of each Part. The plan can be read all the way through or selectively, according to the reader's interests. Government agencies, businesses, nonprofit institutions and others can choose specific topics relevant to their activities. There is also an Appendix to the plan containing technical reports and resources relevant to topics in the plan.

- For a **quick overview of key themes**, major recommendations, and the process used to create the plan, read the Executive Summary.
- To understand the **aspirations for the future and community values that are the foundation of the plan**, read Chapters 1–2. These chapters are based on an extensive community participation process and designed to answer the question: What kind of place do we want to be in the 21st century? They provide the vision for the future, guiding principles for planning, and a description of the public process.
- To **understand the starting point for the comprehensive plan and how we got here**, read Chapter 3. It lays out the key existing conditions and circumstances of the city when the plan was developed in 2011–2012.
- To find out about **specific topics**, from green systems to neighborhoods to economic development and infrastructure, choose the topics of interest to you from Chapters 4–13. Each chapter provides a table of goals and policies, an introduction with a brief list of priorities, a set of recommended strategies and actions to achieve the goals, and a final section, “Getting Started,” identifying possible early action items to get going on the recommendations of that chapter. Many of them are organizational and do not require new funding.
- To find out about **recommended changes in land use, and principles for new zoning and urban design approaches**, read Chapter 14.
- To find out about **how to make this a living plan and how to implement it**, read Chapter 15. There you will find a matrix of actions, responsible parties, timelines, and potential resources for Chapters 4–14.